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SUBJECT: RWANDA: UNHCR MANAGING SCARCITY AND INCREASED
NUMBERS

¶1. (U) Summary: Managing the Congolese refugee population in Rwanda presented a significant challenge to UNHCR and its implementing partners. Congolese continue to arrive in the camps, and the camp birth rate adds significantly to the refugee population. The camps are overcrowded, with space allocations below SPHERE standards. With the exception of food, all indicators to measure refugee care and maintenance are below the established standards. In light of the political situation in the DRC, it is unlikely that: 1) refugees will not arrive in 2008-2009, or 2) significant repatriation will alleviate camp crowding in the same period. In the coming year, maintaining the present level of camp services will require an increase in resources that UNHCR does not expect to achieve. End summary.

CAMP POPULATION GROWS AS RESOURCES SHRINK

¶2. (U) In the first three months of 2008, ARC registered 3,337 new arrivals at the Nyabiheke refugee camp. The camp, originally built to hold a maximum of 5000 refugees, has a population of 8,582. The additional refugees placed an unexpected demand on camp resources, and on the environment. Firewood, the principal fuel for refugees, is in short supply. Foraging by refugees in the neighboring fields and forests resulted in isolated incidents of violence between refugee youth and the surrounding Rwandan population. As a result of the topography of the camp, refugee shelters are clustered together in a way that precludes the privacy and healthy separation foreseen by SPHERE standards.

¶3. (U) The condition of refugee shelters was generally poor. In the Gihembe camp, refugees did not have sufficient building materials to repair weather damage and deterioration of their homes. Plastic sheeting, supplied by UNHCR in 2008 to serve as roofing material, was of poor quality, leading to water damage to the mud and wattle construction of the shelters. UNHCR protection officers told RefCoord the plastic sheeting they received recently was of a uniformly inferior quality. However, they had no replacement materials, and had no control over the quality of materials they received from UNHCR logistics.

¶4. (U) Wood for fires and for construction was in short supply. The Government of Rwanda (GOR) placed some areas

close to camps off limits for wood harvesting, forcing Rwandan camp authorities and UNHCR to transport wood from designated areas to the camp. Even with these measures, wood was in chronically short supply.

15. (U) The picture was similar in all the Congolese camps in Rwanda. The slow increase in refugee numbers and the age of the camp infrastructure led to a steady decrease in UNHCR's ability to maintain standards of service provision. ARC and UNHCR were effectively managing the resources at their disposal, making hard decisions about priorities for building and rehabilitation. ARC distributed wooden poles to serve as the framework for new housing. Working with refugee committees, ARC was overseeing the rehabilitation of key camp facilities such as the health clinics and centers for the prevention of gender based violence. ARC camp managers had some small success encouraging refugee committees to rebuild shelters.

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BENEFICIARY PROGRAMMING ON TARGET

16. (U) Key programs for refugees continued and were meeting program targets. Camp managers reported a high coverage for immunization programs, and the health profile for refugees was similar to that of the local population. HIV/AIDS programs supported by PEPFAR funds were well managed. Refugees had access to information about avoiding HIV infection, and those living with HIV were protected by refugee committees and camp workers from discrimination. Programs to prevent and address gender based violence were meeting grant targets. Unfortunately, the participation of men in GBV programs lagged well behind the targets dictated by UNHCR and ARC program plans.

17. (U) The GOR appeared to have a good working relationship with UNHCR in Kigali and in the field. Officers of the Ministry for Local Government (MINALOC) were present at all the camps, and had regular contact with UNHCR. In the camps, the MINALOC officers appeared to have regular contact with refugees and camp management.

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PROTECTION PROBLEMS FOR UNHCR, GOR AND PARTNERS

18. (U) After a three-month gap, a new senior protection officer began working in Kigali. During RefCoord's visit, the officer was only beginning her assessment of protection issues. She listed the shortage of firewood among her most difficult protection challenges. UNHCR took over the distribution of firewood in 2007. Since that time, shortages continued in all the camps.

19. (U) The GOR was concerned with reforestation, and policed the collection of firewood in and around the refugee camps. Refugees foraged to meet household needs, in violation of the law, provoking anger among the local population.

110. (U) Access to services and identity documents was also a concern for refugees. Congolese refugees had never been issued identity cards that would assure their freedom of movement, and access to facilities in Rwanda. The GOR undertook to issue identity cards for refugees after completing the ongoing national identity card programs for Rwandan citizens.

111. (U) UNHCR was concerned that the GOR was slow in completing status determinations for asylum seekers. The identification of unaccompanied minors in the camps and among asylum seekers was also an important protection concern. UNHCR was working closely with the government to improve MINALOC capacity to provide refugee and asylum services.

¶12. (U) Overcrowding in the camps made land another important protection issue. The GOR and UNHCR were working together to identify suitable sites for a new refugee camp. The GOR submitted three sites to UNHCR planners in March 2008. UNHCR rejected one sight immediately. Proposals for the two remaining sites were submitted to UNHCR headquarters for further study. UNHCR-Rwanda is confident the GOR will open a new site in fiscal year 2009.

PLANNING SCENARIOS FOR UNHCR IN RWANDA

¶13. (U) UNHCR was preparing to deal with three possible scenarios for Congolese refugees in 2009-2010. The first and most likely scenario is the status quo. Refugees would continue to arrive at the present rate, and the land available for their use would remain restricted. In this scenario, an increase in funding would be needed to maintain the minimal standards for care and maintenance.

¶14. (U) In the second, less likely scenario, refugees, encouraged by peace and stability at home, register in large numbers for repatriation to DRC. In this instance, the logistic support to manage returns would be synchronized with the absorption capacity in the regions of return within the DRC.

¶15. (U) The third scenario supposes an influx of refugees from the DRC sparked by failed peace talks, or violence between armed groups contending for power in the Kivus. That scenario presented the gravest consequences for UNHCR in Rwanda. Responding to an influx would require UNHCR to QRwanda. Responding to an influx would require UNHCR to quickly call on emergency resources from Geneva, and from other UN organizations already present in Rwanda. Given the present land situation, a significant influx could easily snowball into the kind of complex emergency for which the "One UN" concept was designed.

¶16. (U) Comment: UNHCR and partners are doing a good job of managing scarcity. However, shortages are forcing local

actors to concentrate of maintaining refugees at a level just under SPHERE standards. In the event of repatriation to DRC, refugees and refugee agencies are ill prepared to manage a complex return scenario. Cross-border cooperation is limited, and refugees are not practicing self-reliance in a way that would prepare them to begin life again in a post-conflict DRC. End comment.